

Definition of Grievance

The VLRB has such adjudicatory jurisdiction as is conferred on it by statute.¹ In deciding grievances the VLRB is limited by the statutory definition of grievance, which provides:

"Grievance" means an employee's, group of employees', or the employee's collective bargaining representative's expressed dissatisfaction, presented in writing, with aspects of employment or working conditions under a collective agreement or the discriminatory application of a rule or regulation, which has not been resolved to a satisfactory result through informal discussion with immediate supervisors.²

In cases where grievants claim a “discriminatory application of a rule or regulation”, the Board has followed the Supreme Court guidance that discrimination in this instance simply means unequal treatment of individuals in the same circumstances under the applicable rule.³ Failure of an employer to apply a binding rule is sufficient to require a finding of discrimination.⁴ Employer regulations governing procedures, or guidelines mandating procedures for management, constitute binding rules or regulations.⁵

In deciding grievances, the VLRB has concluded that past practices are encompassed within the statutory definition of grievance.⁶ The Board has recognized that day-to-day practices mutually accepted by the parties may attain the status of contractual rights and duties, particularly where they are significant, long-standing and not at variance with contract provisions.⁷

In holding its view that the contractual relationship between the parties in labor relations normally consists of more than the specific contract provisions and encompasses existing practices, the Board cited with approval the statement of the U.S. Supreme Court that there are “too many people, too many problems, too many unforeseeable contingencies to make the words of the contract the exclusive source of rights and

¹ In re Grievance of Brooks, 135 Vt. 563, 570 (1977).

² 3 V.S.A. §902(14).

³ Nzomo v. Vermont State Colleges, 136 Vt. 97, 102 (1978). Grievance of Imburgio, 11 VLRB 168 (1988).

⁴ Id. Grievance of Gobin, 158 Vt. 432, 434 (1992). Grievance of Roll, 2 VLRB 228, 233 (1979).

⁵ Grievance of Gobin, 158 Vt. at 435. Grievance of Cochran, 24 VLRB 54, 62 (2001).

⁶ Grievance of Cronin, 6 VLRB 37, 67-69 (1983).

⁷ Grievance of Hanifin, 11 VLRB 18, 27 (1988). Grievance of Cronin, *supra*. Grievance of Allen, 5 VLRB 411, 417 (1982). Grievance of Beyor, 5 VLRB 222, 238-239 (1982).

duties.”⁸ If contractual effect is to be granted a past practice, that practice must be of sufficient import to the parties that they can be presumed to have bargained in reference to it and reached a mutual agreement or understanding.⁹ The Board has indicated that it will not find a binding past practice when it conflicts with statutory provisions.¹⁰

In deciding grievances, the Board has deemed it appropriate to look to Constitutional law where language in a collective bargaining agreement imports a Constitutional standard and the Board must interpret that portion of the agreement.¹¹ However, absent that circumstance, the term "grievance" is not so infinitely expandable as to include every Constitutional right.¹² In one case involving the dismissal of a State manager not covered by a contract, the VLRB cited the merit system principle, contained in statute¹³, which "assure(s) fair treatment of . . . employees in all aspects of personnel administration . . . with proper regard for their . . . Constitutional rights as citizens"; to decide a Constitutional claim concerning free speech rights.¹⁴

Also, statutory provisions are not encompassed within the definition of "grievance" unless they are incorporated into a collective bargaining agreement, rule or regulation.¹⁵ For instance, the Board has held that it did not have jurisdiction over alleged violations of the Vermont Fair Employment Practices Act. The Board stated: “Just as the Vermont General Assembly has specifically conferred on us exclusive original jurisdiction to resolve alleged violations of the specific labor relations statutes which we administer, so too has the Legislature specifically conferred exclusive original jurisdiction on the Attorney General, State’s Attorneys and the superior courts to address alleged violations of (the Fair Employment Practices Act.)”¹⁶ The Board reached the

⁸ Grievance of Allen, 5 VLRB 411, 417-418 (1982); *citing* United Steelworkers of America v. Warrior and Gulf Navigation Co., 363 U.S. 574 (1960).

⁹ Cronin, 6 VLRB at 68-69.

¹⁰ Grievance of Beyor, 5 VLRB 222, 238-240 (1982).

¹¹ Grievance of Sypher and the Vermont State Colleges Faculty Federation, Local 3180, AFL-CIO, 5 VLRB 102, 125 (1982). Cronin, *supra*. Grievance of Roy, 6 VLRB 163 (1983).

¹² Grievance of Russell, 7 VLRB 60, 80-81 (1984).

¹³ 3 V.S.A. §312(b)(5)

¹⁴ Grievance of Morrissey, 7 VLRB 129, 169-171 (1984); *Affirmed*, 149 Vt. 1 (1987).

¹⁵ Boynton v. Snelling, 147 Vt. 564 (1987). In re McMahon, 136 Vt. 512 (1978). Grievance of VSCSF and Laflin, 16 VLRB 276 (1993).

¹⁶ Grievance of B.M., et al, 15 VLRB 503 (1992). *See also* Grievance of VSCSF and Laflin, 16 VLRB 276, 280281 (1993); Grievance of Kennedy, 18 VLRB 19 (1995); Grievance of McIsaac, 26 VLRB 24, 92 (2003).

same conclusion with respect to alleged violations of the state and federal family and medical leave acts.¹⁷

Further, individuals may file grievances under the State Employees Act only if they are considered “employees” within the meaning of the Act. For instance, temporary employees are not considered “employees” under the Act, and the Board has no jurisdiction over the grievances of temporary State employees.¹⁸ Also, employees exempt from the state classified service are not considered “employees” under the Act eligible to appeal grievances to the Board.¹⁹ Classified state employees in their original probationary period also are not eligible to file grievances with the Board.²⁰

¹⁷ Grievance of VSCSF and Laflin, 16 VLRB 276, 280-281 (1993). Grievance of Woolaver, 21 VLRB 219 (1998). Grievance of UE and Bruley, 22 VLRB 167, 182 (1999). Grievance of McIsaac, 26 VLRB 24, 91 (2003).

¹⁸ 3 V.S.A. Sections 311(a)11), 902(5)(A). Grievance of McCluskey, 7 VLRB 359 (1984). Emerson v. Vermont Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation, 20 VLRB 41 (1997).

¹⁹ 3 V.S.A. § 902(5)(A). Grievance of Woolaver, 21 VLRB 219 (1998).

²⁰ Grievance of Peplowski, 6 VLRB 16 (1983). Grievance of Cole, 6 VLRB 204 (1983). Grievance of Barrows, 8 VLRB 82 (1985).